

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT BROWNSVILLE  
March 8, 2001**

During Spring 2001, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) El Paso Border Office, the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) and the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) hosted a series of six roundtable discussions in Texas and New Mexico to solicit input from border communities regarding how binational border environmental issues should be addressed. Meetings were held in Laredo, Edinburg, Brownsville, and El Paso, Texas; and Las Cruces and Deming, New Mexico during March 2001. EPA and its Mexican counterpart, Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), are currently working with the ten border states and U.S. tribes on a draft framework for the next border program based on the ideas and recommendations emerging from the roundtable discussions and other events. The following summarizes the roundtable session held in Brownsville, Texas on March 8, 2001.

**WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

The U.S.-Mexico Border Roundtable Meeting was facilitated by Mr. Darrin Swartz-Larson, Director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 6 El Paso Border Office, and Dr. William Berg, University of Texas at Brownsville. The purpose of the Border Roundtable Meeting is to involve local stakeholders in the development of the new border program to be implemented in the year 2002. This approach to the program development process will foster the generation of ideas, suggestions, and comments of the local community stakeholders, which will result in the creation of a plan effective in dealing with their unique environmental issues.

Mr. Swartz-Larson, EPA, made a presentation on the current Border XXI Program and plans for development of the new border program plan. Dr. Berg facilitated a group discussion designed to solicit input from local community stakeholders regarding the new border program.

**PRESENTATION ON THE STATUS OF THE BORDER XXI PROGRAM**

**Overview and Background of the U.S.-Mexico Border XXI Program**

- Binational program initiated in 1996
- Legal Foundation: La Paz Agreement of 1983
- Border XXI Program implemented through a voluntary, coordinating mechanism
  - < The program is a strategy, a framework, a forum
  - < The program does not create any new laws or rights

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING**  
**UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT BROWNSVILLE**  
**March 8, 2001**

- EPA and SEMARNAT (formerly SEMARNAP—*Secretaría de Medio Ambiente, Recursos Naturales y Pesca*) are the lead agencies. Other participants include:

< Other Federal agencies:

Department of Health and Human Services (U.S.)  
Secretariat of Health (Mexico)  
Department of Interior (U.S.)  
International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC)

< State and tribal partners

< Local and community stakeholders

**Mission of the New Border XXI Program**

- To work cooperatively toward sustainable development—meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs—through (1) the protection of human health and the environment and (2) proper management of natural resources.

**Strategies of the New Border XXI Program**

- Ensuring public involvement
- Building local capacity and decentralizing environmental management
- Ensuring interagency cooperation

**New Border XXI Program Workgroups**

- Air Workgroup
- Contingency Planning and Emergency Response Workgroup
- Cooperative Enforcement and Compliance Workgroup
- Environmental Health Workgroup
- Environmental Information Resources Workgroup

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT BROWNSVILLE  
March 8, 2001**

- Hazardous and Solid Waste Workgroup
- Natural Resources Workgroup
- Pollution Prevention Workgroup
- Water Workgroup

**Road to New Border XXI Program Plan**

- ***Stakeholder involvement.*** The involvement of stakeholders is the primary goal for the development of the new Border XXI Program. Stakeholders include:
  - < States and tribes
  - < Local jurisdictions
  - < Community members (public)
  - < Environmental justice (EJ) and community-based organizations
  - < Non-government organizations (NGO)
  - < Industry and local businesses
  - < Academia—Public school systems and universities
- ***Options for the Structure of the New Border XXI Program***
  - < Continue with current structure
  - < Modify current structure
  - < Implement a regional approach
  - < Others
- ***Time frame***
  - < Border roundtable meetings to be held from August 2000 through March 2001

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT BROWNSVILLE  
March 8, 2001**

- < Briefing of the incoming administration from December 2000 through May 2001
- < Public meetings to be held in Fall 2001 before the New Border XXI Plan is drafted to receive stakeholder input for the plan
- < Preparation of the Draft Border XXI Program Plan beginning in Winter 2001
- < Solicitation of comments on the Draft Plan
- < Finalization and implementation of the New Border XXI Program Plan

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

A group discussion followed the opening presentation to foster input from local community stakeholders regarding current border environmental issues and the new border program. This section summarizes the comments made by stakeholders during the discussion period.

**What are the most critical binational border environmental and human health issues in this area? (i.e., what issues will require U.S. and Mexican collaboration and cooperation to address?)**

- Rio Grande water quality and quantity
  - < It should be a priority to cleanup and restore the natural ecology of the Rio Grande.
- Unsustainable population growth
- Inadequate housing
- Protection of regional natural resources
  - < Desertification and deforestation of south Texas
  - < Maintaining “green space” in wake of population and industry growth
  - < Eradication of non-native, invasive wildlife and plant species
- Illegal dumping of solid waste
- Transportation of hazardous waste chemicals
  - < Emergency response

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT BROWNSVILLE  
March 8, 2001**

- < The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has been unsuccessful and needs to be revisited.
- Air quality
- The large number of unsustainable industries in the region
- BECC and NADBANK have not fulfilled their commitments regarding clean-up
- Increased incidence of infectious diseases
- Lack of social infrastructure
- Healthcare issues
- < Lack of training of the medical community to identify and treat environmental health conditions
- Community outreach and education
  - < Should be based on community needs and goals.
  - < Education and outreach should be conducted on both sides of the border.
  - < Education and outreach should reach rural residents and residents of colonias.
  - < Education should be taught from the “bottom up” and from the “top, down”.
  - < Environmental health education is needed.
  - < Binational education and outreach training is needed.
- Industry waste and city municipal waste
- Lack of understanding by local judiciaries in environmental law. Local judges are unfamiliar with environmental crimes.
- Landfill issues. Local landfill space is projected to be a problem within next 8 years.
- Preservation and expansion of four natural resources
- Funding

**Who should be part of an effort to identify and prioritize the most critical environmental and human health issues in this area?**

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT BROWNSVILLE  
March 8, 2001**

- Colonias and low-income communities
- Representatives of affected communities
- Health department representatives from the local, state, and federal level
- Environmental justice communities
- Southwest non-profit and grassroots organizations
- Utilities providers
- Industry and other commercial entities
  - < Eco-tourism business
  - < Small businesses
  - < Real estate developers
  - < Academia
  - < U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT); Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT)
- Local youth; school districts
- Texas Parks & Wildlife department
- Brownsville Economic Development Council (BEDC)
- Enforcement entities (i.e., ordinance)

**Of those organizations and individuals identified above, what should their role be?**

- Community representatives should be included in decision-making meetings.

**What are the benefits and challenges of border involvement? Are you more likely to participate?**

- Politicians will participate if they see that voter confidence can be increased.
- Local businesses will participate if they see that participation may lead to increased business.
- Colonias will participate if they understand that their participation will help foster better health and better jobs.

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT BROWNSVILLE  
March 8, 2001**

**What must the next binational border program include to be successful?**

- Involvement of NGOs as key players in the planning and development of the next border plan
- Community participation
  - < Communities should be included in the scheduling of decision-making meetings and should be able to participate and provide input in making environmental decisions.
- Formal input mechanism for community stakeholders
- Training of federal decision-makers
- Dissemination of information in media types other than the internet.
- It may be more cost effective to encourage EPA guidelines at the local community level
- Issues and problems should be prioritized and addressed one or two at a time.
- Availability of an inventory of resources available to address environmental problems
- Education of stakeholders regarding EPA's role, responsibilities, and efforts, as well as of EPA resources available to stakeholders.
- Bio-environmental indicators
  - < Birth defects registry
  - < Infectious diseases
  - < Population of species (flora and fauna)
- An environmental justice commission or component
- An increased presence in the border regions.
- Better coordination, cooperation between Environmental Justice, State (TNRCC) and EPA
- Need more cultural working relationship at the local, state, and federal levels
- Community needs to be presented with entire story, not just bits and parts as EPA sees fit

**U.S.-MEXICO BORDER ROUNDTABLE MEETING  
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March 8, 2001**

**CLOSING REMARKS**

In closing, meeting participants were encouraged to contact EPA and TNRCC directly with additional comments and suggestions. They were also advised that information, comments, and suggestions presented at the roundtable discussion would be incorporated into an option format that will be used to develop the next border program plan. A draft plan is expected in January 2002.